

of the book, one of layers and nuance and even, perhaps, contradiction. Note that this is fundamentally different from going in with the intention to persuade. We are not gathered to refine a collection of disparate judgments into a polished, unanimous opinion. Instead, we discuss together in order to construct a conjoint assessment bigger than the sum of its parts.

With that in mind, here are ten guidelines to keep in mind as we undertake collaborative evaluation of books for children and teens.

1. Trust your opinion.

Your presence at the discussion means you have something to contribute to it. This is true no matter your level of experience. Indeed, copious practice at thinking and talking about books can lead to the kind of prescriptive expertise that expects things to be a certain way. A pair of fresh eyes can see alternative possibilities. Challenging the assumed supremacy of the experts requires some gumption. Do not relent. Your opinion matters, whether it matches the masters' or stands alone.

2. Question your opinion.

As important as it is to hang on to our confidence, we must leave room for other understandings. Many of us have read widely and voraciously, and through that practice have developed an assuredness that allows us to speak with imposing authority. Not only does that kind of confidence run the risk of shutting down less practiced discussers,

it blinds us to other points of view as well. There are always things to learn, and listening can be just as edifying as speaking.

3. Follow the criteria.

In most cases, discussions tasked with choosing one or a few books from many include criteria for consideration. These criteria define excellence, articulating particular expectations of form, style, approach, etc. Criteria like these help frame your discussion. They exist to keep everyone focused on the same elements, examining the books through a single lens. Sticking to your criteria will keep contributions to the discussion in close alignment.

4. Ignore the criteria.

Even the most thorough criteria cannot anticipate every eventuality. The days when all books for children and teens conformed to hard-lined constructions, dividing text and illustration, story and fact, are behind us. Possibilities are expanding exponentially, and full appreciation of them depends upon relaxing some expectations and looking beyond established rubrics. You may find that some criteria conflict with others. Sometimes you will need to put your faith in the book itself, and let it tell you how to read it. Don't follow a rule off a cliff.

5. Trust the process.

How tempting it is to imagine the reception of your decision(s), to predict congratulation or condemnation, or

to step away from your convictions to (attempt to) appease the masses. Do not allow your deliberations to be swayed, for or against a particular book, based on how you anticipate people might react. Of course some decisions will be more popular than others, but aiming for the fashionable choice is no way to identify excellence. Proceed with diligence and candor and you will arrive where you belong.

6. Do your homework.

This one seems simple, and in truth, really, it is. There is no substitute for deep and thorough reading beforehand. Detailed notes, with specific examples of elements you admire or disdain, will support your commentary and bolster your confidence. Your preparation will also allow you to relax. Instead of worrying about what you're going to say next, you're free to listen and learn.

7. Talk about the books (not yourself).

Deliberative book discussion requires work. There are lots of books to read, notes to take, and opinions to formulate. We would not undertake this amount of work without a certain passion for the process, and the outcome. Often our zeal connects directly to our own transformative childhood reading experiences. Books touch us and move us, and we do the work we do in hopes of perpetuating that magic. So it is no surprise that our responses to especially distinctive books can be deeply personal. We must remember that personal

responses are just that, and have little meaning to others. Rather than relating what you thought or how you felt while reading a book, talk about the book itself; make the book the subject of your commentary and consider how the author or illustrator achieved the impact you experienced. Not only do you give the creators their due, but you frame your thoughts in terms most easily understood by your colleagues.

8. Be specific.

The most impressive books are often the most difficult to describe. Capturing their distinction in a few sentences requires care and precision. Words like *good*, *pretty*, *nice*, and *bad* don't carry much meaning. Describe each book in

The Horn Book Social Club promotional graphic features a dark background with a large, stylized 'f.5' in the top right corner. The text 'You Tube' is written in a script font at the top left. Below it, a circular logo contains a stylized bird. The main title 'The Horn Book Social Club' is prominently displayed in the center. At the bottom, there are social media links: 'hbook.com/feed', 'twitter.com/hornbook', 'facebook.com/TheHornBook', and 'youtube.com/user/HornBookInc'. The 'You Tube' logo is repeated at the bottom right.

a way that distinguishes it from all others in consideration. Forcing yourself to be precise will help you formulate your own opinions, and help others to formulate theirs. Even if you struggle to articulate exactly what you see in a book, you'll find that the more specific your language, the more inclined others will be to jump in and help.

9. Play nice.

The sheer load involved in considering a great many books can be positively

daunting, and we may supplement ordinary diligence with a dose of passion to carry us through. The tendency, though, is for that passion to bleed

past our commitment to the process and seep into our investment in the books. When we arrive at the hour of deliberation, finally, we are excited and primed and perhaps a little frayed. Healthy debate may degrade to contentious argument if we are not careful to prevent it. There's no enlightenment without disagreement, but you mustn't be rude. Focus on the material at hand, not one another. You can question an assessment without disrespecting the colleague who offered it. When everyone supports a culture of open discourse, real learning happens.

10. Accentuate the positive.

In my experience, this is the hardest of all the rules to follow. We are primed to focus on what *isn't* working. It is

easier to recognize mistakes than it is to articulate successes; catching an anachronism is easier than expressing the elegant simplicity of a picture book text, for example. But when we embrace dismissal as our default position, the process is reduced to a last-book-standing selection. Think about the books as hot-air balloons. Our job is to identify the one that rises highest, concentrating on those elements that send it aloft. Of course there is no perfect book, and we are right to take flaws

into account. But let us think of those flaws only as ballast, bags of sand limiting the elevation, rather than as arrows poised to puncture. The least

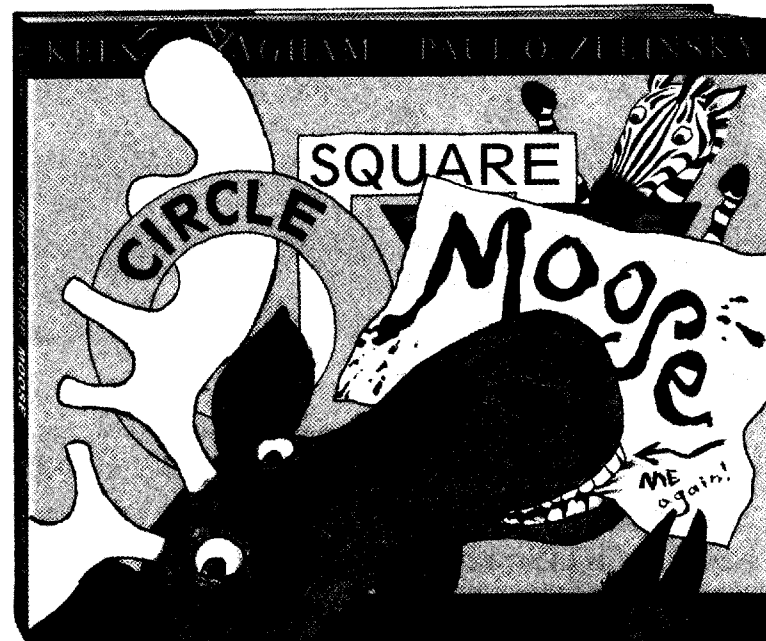
problematic book and the best book are not the same thing. By focusing on strengths, we have a better chance of identifying and landing on distinction.

AS WITH ALL RULES, these work best taken with a grain of salt. Number 4 on this very list suggests we pay only as much attention to them as we care to. And I'd argue that that's about right. Ultimately, success comes from engagement and openness, from investing everything we have *not* in ourselves as individuals but in our collective strength. These rules are not intended to prescribe the process; they exist simply to foster the type of culture where this sort of investment pays real dividends.

Go forth and deliberate. ■

Think about books as hot-air balloons. Our job is to identify the ones that rise highest.

Moose is back, and he's "a star"*



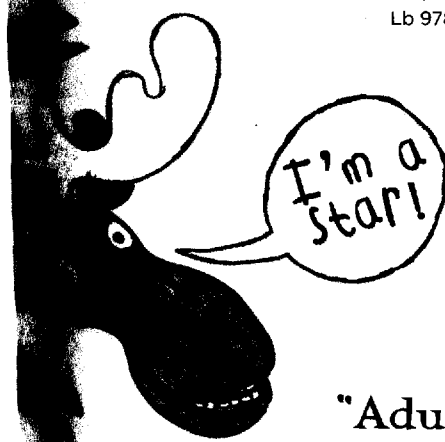
Tr 978-0-06-229003-8 • \$17.99
Lb 978-0-06-229004-5 • \$18.89

★ "Wild fun."
—Publishers Weekly (starred)

★ "Brilliant."
—Kirkus Reviews (starred)

"Hilarious."
—School Library Journal

"Adults should be prepared to share this book again and again."
—The Horn Book



Also available in audio and video starring Judy Blume, Brian Floca, and more. Visit www.harpercollinschildrens.com!